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THE ITCHING OF THE EYE

787
826
[77]

The itching of the eye is considered as an unlucky omen. Grose, celebrated antiquarian, who collected together so many of the superstitions prevalent in his day, says: "When the right eye itches the party affected will shortly cry."

THE ITCHING OF THE HAND

Among other omens we are told that the itching of the hands signifies that they will shortly receive money.

HOWLING OF DOGS

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763

A superstitious opinion vulgarly prevails in Malta that the howling of a dog in a neighbourhood is the presage of death to any that are sick in it.

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The howling of the dog is ascribed by some to its keen sense of the odour of approaching dissolution. 825 763

This superstition which, while not confined to our Island, appears to have been almost as well known in ancient times as at the present day. 825 763 171

Dr. Nathaniel Home, in his "Daemonologie" page 60, says: "If dogs howl in the night near a house where somebody is sick, it is a sign of death."

Capitolinus tells us: that the dogs by their howlings presaged the death of Maximinus.

TINGLING of the EAR

It is a well known superstition among the Maltese that when the ear tingles they usually say that somebody is talking of them. A tingling of the right ear 787 826

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787 826 denotes that a friend is speaking well of one: a tingling of the left, implying the opposite.

[171] The opinion, from whence this proverbial saying is derived, is of great antiquity, being thus mentioned by Pliny: "Moreover is not this an opinion generally received that when our ears do glow and tingle some there be that in our absence do talk of us?"

MEETING OF WOMEN

846 787 777 If two women who have been confined on the same day meet before forty days, one of them will suffer some misfortune either in her own person or in that of her child.

THE MONTH OF MAY

777 May is considered as the month of accidents, and consequently many be-

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she honours and calls upon in her sister's hour of need. The tale is told of the birth-rose which was forgotten. Triplets were born. Later the rose was found, having grown on its withered stem three healthy branches bearing fresh, green leaves. Whatever deep significance attached originally to the birth-rose, the custom has a beauty of its own.

The next thought is for the little one's future. A gold ring or some other golden object is placed in the water in which he or she is washed, in order, they say, that riches will not be lacking. At one time, it may be, something of more value than the dross of riches was sought, for gold was the symbol of wisdom and a bright understanding long before it had value as currency.

It will be well if the baby is not red-headed, for the red-headed child will inevitably be known as "Son of the Wind," "Daughter of the alcove," or even more scurrilously, "Child of the priest." This readiness to doubt the paternity of poor little "Copper-knob" seems to indicate that, in spite of the blue or grey eyes of the peasants, the Maltese have always been an essentially brunette people. The slur may be no older than the occupation of the priestly knights, when celibacy must frequently have proved too much for the young "Aryans" of the Teutonic Langues. It may date back to the much earlier time of red-bearded Ullyses. It may, again, be nothing more than a rendering of "love-child"—for red has always been the colour of Love—sacred to Astoreth, Isis, and Venus.

Yet another of the Old Things has a hand in birth. Even to-day it is accounted by some a serious matter for a child to be born on Christmas Eve. Such a child is in danger of becoming a *Gaugau*—one whose spirit will leave its body every Christmas Eve—"They then go out and wander all over the island frightening people with their groanings. After thus performing these ghostly pranks for some hours,

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will only be necessary for a "wise woman" or witch to spit on the hair while uttering a curse to bring misfortune upon the head which nourished it.

Grez will be careful not to laugh too heartily on a Friday—when the memory of the Crucifixion should make all sad. She will make the Sign of the Cross on leaving her house, on entering any vehicle or boat for no matter how short a journey, on cutting a piece of new cloth, before her baby's mouth when it yawns—so that evil spirits may not enter. On meeting a deformed or maimed person she will sign her corresponding limb or part of her body with the Cross.

When she brings flowers into her house she will be as careful to exclude the acacia as any West-country woman to avoid "may" or whitethorn, for the spiky Maltese acacia is the "thorn" of Palestine wherewith the Saviour was crowned.

These are but a few of the small ways in which the peasant woman pays a somewhat mixed homage to the Old Things as well as to the tenets of her Faith. In her favour it may be said that her "superstitions" are more logical than those of such folk who habitually "touch wood" or object to a third cigarette from one match.

THE FESTAS

The Festa, primarily a religious festival and a Holy Day of Obligation, provides the only relaxation for a hardworking and frugal people. Such simple pleasures as a meal of unaccustomed meat, a little wine, processions, and fireworks give full rein to the most lovable, childlike side of the national character. The importance attaching to these periodical holidays is well illustrated by an old rhyme: